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ABSTRACT

Recent research into the composing processes of children owes much to Piaget's postulate that cognitive development is linear--that children progress through stages of development whereby tasks are mastered at certain levels of cognitive understanding. The stages of children's writing processes (prewriting, composing, revising), as well as language development, drawing, and reading have been examined by Donald Graves, L. M. Calkins, and Glenda Bissex, among others. In one study, C. Temple, R. Nathan, and N. Burris concluded that children make the same discoveries in the same order. Susan Sowers detailed her observation of a first grade class, in which she used the techniques of invented spelling, writing conferences, and writing without assigned topics to compile children's writing for publishing. Issues currently being examined include the use of drawing as a prewriting exercise, and the relationships between scribbling, drawing, and talking. The issues of invented spelling and writing before reading have profound implications for new directions in elementary education. A growing amount of research indicates that reading is a highly abstract task and should follow rather than precede writing instruction. Frances Kane's work advocates the progression of thinking, drawing, writing, and reading. The link between Piaget's stages of cognitive development and its writing counterparts is a promising area of research. (NKA)

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Carol Funderburk

A Review of Research in Children's Writing

Children are not adults in miniature. Their view of reality and their use of language take different forms than the perceptions and communicative systems of adults. In teaching children to write, therefore, we should recognize that their writing is a reflection of their developing consciousness in which they have messages, often revealingly profound, to tell us.

However, the longstanding belief that children are miniature adults--a belief that ignores work of theorists such as Piaget--has led researchers to study the product, not the process, of children's writing, as Kay Moss finds in her review of research (1982). New studies, though, such as those conducted by the Donald Graves team, have led to a fresh interest in the composing processes of children. In the following paper, I will focus on reviewing both theoretical and empirical studies that will help us understand more about the ways that children write. Specifically, I will address these questions:

* How has the work of Piaget been linked to the processes of children's writing?
* Over the last fifteen years, what studies seem to have had a major impact on our understanding of the process of children's writing?
* What are the current issues in children's writing?
* What are the implications for further research?

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I have not attempted to be exhaustive in this brief review piece, but I have instead focused on types of inquiry which might best help us continue to understand the composing processes of children.

JEAN PIAGET AND CHILDREN'S WRITING

In discussing the process by which children learn to write, one might begin with Jean Piaget's postulate that cognitive development is linear, that children progress through stages of development whereby tasks are mastered at certain levels of cognitive understanding. Coupled with his developmental stages, Piaget's theoretical concepts of preoperation, concrete, and formal operations have provided a base from which educators and researchers can work. Although Piaget's work serves as a backdrop for discussing the stages of children's writing processes, there is little research to show the specific relationships between Piaget's developmental stages and the stages of the writing process.

Ginsburg and Opper (1969), however, have suggested pedagogical relationships between Piaget's findings and traditional educational techniques. They propose that children are quite unlike adults and respond best to concrete activities rather than verbal instruction. While examining Piaget's concepts of equilibration and conservation, Ginsburg and Opper propose that verbal understanding follows motoric and internal understanding. They note that the most important proposition that an educator can derive from Piaget's work is that children learn best from concrete activities. Thus classroom techniques

need to accommodate for more concrete activity, and writing is clearly one of these. In addition to Ginsburg and Opper, Arthur Bessell (1972) looks at Piaget s theory and grades K-6. Although Bessell gives no criteria for excluding children above grade six, he examines concepts of egocentricity and concrete thinking. Implications for teachers include looking for information from wrong answers and giving open ended tasks such as creative writing with discussion and exploration.

However, much of the research linking Piaget's theories to the study of writing lacks any identifiable structure for what ages are being studied, what determines the choice of populations studied, and what age groups are capable of performing certain tasks within the writing process.

MAJOR RESEARCH SINCE 1970

Research over the past fifteen years has examined the stages of children s writing processes (pre-writing, composing, revising), as well as contributions of language development, drawing and reading. Kay Moss' 1981 review of research regarding the writing process of children covers the major research up to 1981. She includes the work of Donald Graves, since widely associated with observations about children s writing processes. Also important is Dieterich and Behm's annotated bibliography (1981), which contains twenty-three studies relating to children s writing. Calkins (1980), part of the Graves team, notes that there was no previous research on children's re-writing strategies, and she discussed four types of re-writing techniques with third graders. The

doctoral dissertation of Glenda Bissex (1980), now published by Harvard University Press is also significant. A case study of her own son s development from age 5 to 11, Bissex observed and documented both reading and writing development, noting patterns of writing development such as global to specific and egocentricity to decentration.

The years 1982 to 1985 produced a number of studies including Temple, Nathan and Burris The Beginnings of Writing (1982), in which the first stages of writing, spelling and composition are examined. By studying a cross section of children, the researchers found that children make essentially the same discoveries in essentially the same order. Temple points to a perceptual theory by which children progress from the whole to parts, global to specific. Their findings lead to a discussion of invented spelling and the stages of the writing process, with suggestions for teachers. Another significant text is edited by R.D. Walshe (1982) about Donald Graves in Australia, in which Graves stressed that writing is a craft, a process, that is practiced and learned by doing, not just assimilated by listening. Without specific reference to Piaget, Graves idea is closely linked to Piaget's motoric understanding. Further, Walshe included an essay by Susan Sowers, "I DS CN RIT SUNR THN WE THNGK;" which discusses her findings about children s writing in Mary E. Giacobbe s first grade class. Using techniques of invented spelling, writing conferences with the teacher, and writing without assigned topics, Sowers watched the young writers develop to writing

personal narratives, "all about" collections, and published what they wrote. The children began to anticipate the writing cycle and internalized their dialogue about writing. A significant researcher of children s writing, Sowers' work is also included in a book edited by Marcia Farr (1985), in which a two-year longitudinal study was conducted with sixteen children in grades 1-4. Again, the study took place in New Hampshire, with one-half the children from Giacobbe s first grade class and one-half from a third grade class. In addition to analyzing written material, Sowers observed the behaviors of children while composing. Although no criteria were given regarding her choice of grades 1-4, Sowers made observations about tasks that each grade level was capable of performing and offered relationships of drawing and speech to children s writing.

CURRENT ISSUES

Drawing as Pre-writing

Drawing is believed to be the precursor of writing and essential to the pre-writing process (Gardner, 1980). Diane DeFord (1980) believes that as early as 2 and 3 years, children can begin to differentiate in their scribbles between writing and drawing. Her 1980 article identifies findings from her study of fifty 2-7 year-olds. While the reader is not given criteria for her choice of 2-7 year-olds (or why she stopped with 7 year-olds) DeFord does identify a progression from scribbling to concepts of linearity, spacing, simple to complex sentences and forms of discourse. In analyzing relationships

between drawing and writing. Rhoda Kellog s Analyzing Children s Art outlines twenty basic scribbles that children make and further proposes that as early as twenty-four months, children can begin to guide their scribblings into patterns. From Sydney, Australia, Elaine Furniss (1983) studied four kindergarten children in 1983. She too noted that drawing precedes writing and is essential in the pre-writing stage: however, she believes that the role of drawing lessens as the child develops in writing expertise. Following Furniss, Sowers (1985) believes that drawing bridges the gap between speech and print, and the work of Linda Lamme and Nancye Childers (1983) follows this continuum by looking at the composing processes of three children, ages 2 to 4, over a six-month period. Children were observed making the transition from scribbling and drawing to composing, and the authors note the significance of talking while composing and point to further research on this subject. The relationship of talking to writing is also discussed by Temple, Nathan, Burris (1982), Sowers (1982), and King and Rental (1979).

Language Development

Frances Kane (1980) draws relationships between scribbling, drawing, and talking, and he alludes to Piaget s internal thinking by stating that verbal thinking is expressed in speech and writing and follows an orderly sequence. In a highly technical work of linguistic analysis, Michael Beveridge (1982) compiles information from fifteen contributors on how the language development of children interacts with cognitive

processes. A significant explanation of the role of language is also found in Charles Read s 1971 work. With a thorough grasp of English phonology, Read discusses how children develop in their understanding of phonics. He finds that children, with a high degree of similarity, organize phonetic segments into categories. Surprisingly, he asserts that children recognize certain phonetic similarities and contrasts that adults will miss.

Invented Spelling and Writing Before Reading

The two issues of invented spelling and writing before reading have profound implications for new directions in elementary education. Traditionally, the elementary educational system emphasizes reading, then writing. A growing amount of research indicates that reading is a highly abstract task and should follow rather than precede writing instruction. Both Shanahan (1980) and Kane (1982) encourage teaching writing prior to reading proficiency. Again, referring to a natural sequence, Kane s work advocates the progression of thinking, drawing, writing and reading. As early as Read s 1971 study, the notion of invented spelling (spelling a word the way it sounds) was introduced. Both Carol Chomsky (1971) and Susan Sowers have written extensively on the use of invented spelling and the efficiency with which children learn to read if allowed to read their own words. Both strongly advocate the position that children s ability to write precedes their ability to read.

An innovative technique, using computers, has been developed in Florida as reported by Spillman and Lutz (1986). Using the IBM program "Writing to Read," and embracing a writing to read philosophy, teachers have discovered a dynamic relationship between writing and meaningful reading. Through this method classroom techniques are said to change as teachers' expectations and attitudes are altered by the writing of their young students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In compiling this review of research, one might propose several promising areas of study for future research. For instance, the theories of Piaget were alluded to in much of the research, but there is little work that clearly identifies the relationship between Piaget's stages of cognitive development and their writing counterparts. Calkins includes one such relationship in her 1980 article by noting that a child's ability to reverse reasoning (ability to follow a line of reasoning back to its origin, achieved between ages 7 and 11) is directly related to Piaget's concrete operations. Such relationships are important to the research on the writing processes of children.

Research techniques--often informal, short term, and poorly defined--also call for further attention. Observation techniques, for example, are predominantly used and control groups were not employed. Most of the studies, with the exception of the Graves two-year study, were short term with small sample groups, and there is little criteria to identify

what population (age, grade, sex) was being examined and for what reasons. Parameters were not explicit. Obviously, researchers need more controlled samples of children in the process of writing.

Naturally, these are but two promising areas of research among many. Through their writing, children continue to demonstrate their uniqueness, apart from the perceptions of the adult world, and the study of the process of children s writing is profoundly revealing to our understanding of their developing consciousness. We can only hope that continuing research will enhance our understanding of children s writing and point to new directions for teachers in the classroom.

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